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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 001450

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN
FROM AMBASSADOR HOAGLAND

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [MARR](#) [SOCI](#) [KZ](#)
SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: IN VINO VERITAS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland: 1.4 (B), (D)

¶1. (C) On August 28, I hosted a reception at Embassy Astana's Chief of Mission Residence in honor of USNAVCENT Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Thomas Cropper and his team. Deputy Minister of Defense Rear Admiral Ratmir Komratov attended as the senior-most Kazakhstani military official, and stayed for nearly two hours. Two senior representatives of the Committee for National Security (KNB), which generally keeps its physical and ideological distance from the U.S. Embassy, also attended: Rear Admiral Kenzhebergen Abikeyev, Chief of the KNB's Border Service Coast Guard, and Bulat Kirgizbayev, Director of the Border Guard Service and a Deputy Chairman of the KNB. They, too, stayed the full time.

¶2. (C) U.S. government bio reporting has portrayed Admiral Komratov as a fat, old drunk, a cauliflower-faced ex-boxer. But he's much more than that. Even though he's a classic example of his old Soviet culture, a "homo sovieticus," he's still very human.

¶3. (C) I had the foyer door of the Residence open to the back garden, and Komratov grabbed my arm and said, "Show me your garden!" Because I had planted and nurtured a fair portion of it myself, I was pleased to do so. As we walked around and chatted one-on-one, he told me that he was born in the southern Kazakhstani city of Taraz, where his father had been the mayor. He said that his parents were both celebrated gardeners: "We always had the best garden in the city!" Every time high-level Communist Party officials came from Moscow, they asked to see the mayor's famous flower gardens. He commented, "My father built his career on chatting up high officials in his garden." Komratov said, "I don't have much time now, but" -- and he pointed to his face and his large torso -- "despite this, I'm my father's son at heart. I like to get my hands dirty in the garden. I want God's earth under my fingernails. I believe in auras. I believe that plants communicate with us and are sensitive to when they can trust us, because we understand them; they also turn their backs on us and wither and die when we don't understand them. That's how God has organized the universe. He created plants before he created us. But generally we don't know any more how to listen to God's creation."

14. (C) Midway through the reception, Komratov told me he has known President Nazarbayev as a personal friend for years and years, and has the deepest respect for what the president has achieved for Kazakhstan since independence -- that he has liberated the Kazakh people and has created an independent and respected nation. Komratov said, "I wrote a poem in honor of him (Nazarbayev), and recited it to him once; but he told me not to recite the poem too often in public, because he doesn't want in the modern world that kind of traditional honor. I asked him, 'Could I do it just occasionally when I'm drunk?' He (Nazarbayev) told me, 'OK, occasionally when you're drunk, but not too often.'" Komratov then recited his poem.

15. (C) Later in the evening Admiral Komratov offered several toasts (wine only, no vodka). During one, he noted the alliance of the Soviet Union and the United States during the Great Patriotic War (WW II) to defeat fascism. This is a very standard, old-guard, Soviet toast. Then he added, "My father fought on the Finland Front, and then in Japan (sic)." I interjected that my father, too, had flown in U.S. Army Air Force planes over Germany (as a reconnaissance intelligence photographer) during the same war. Komratov looked at me, and raised his glass. Then he came around the long buffet table and said, "You know, we (the United States and Kazakhstan) are divided by language, but otherwise we really are pretty much the same people. We somehow have to learn to get beyond that."

16. (C) Near the end of the reception, Komratov offered one

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more toast. He said he'd like to suggest -- as a joke! -- that the United States should declare war on Kazakhstan, which would immediately surrender so that it could become the 51st U.S. state. This was by then the hyperbole of red wine talking, but there is an important cultural lesson here. In Soviet/post-Soviet culture, toasts are a well-oiled opportunity for a bit of truth-telling, even if exaggerated. In a rigidly circumscribed public culture, as those who grew up in the Soviet Union had, once alcohol loosens the tongue, bits of internal truth can be told in toasts, and it is useful to read the alcohol-oiled signals carefully. That is why officials in countries like Kazakhstan are so insistently keen to offer a "hospitality" lunch or dinner to visiting U.S. officials. It is important both to attend such functions and to host them ourselves.

HOAGLAND